

LAHOMA

The Story of a Little "Mountain Country" Girl Who Wanted to Become "Civilized"

BY JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.
Lahoma, an outlaw in the southwest, came to a settler named Gledware and the latter's baby daughter, Lahoma. Gledware and child find refuge among Indians. Gledware is killed by a tribe, whose chief, Red Feather, takes Lahoma to Willock's mountain hideout. Lahoma, who is the outlaw, Willock and his son, Atkins, adore the little girl. As she grows up, Lahoma expresses a longing to become "civilized." Brick promises that her wish shall be granted. They educate her as best they can. A cowboy, Wilfred Compton, finally asks leave to go on his way. Brick and Atkins permit this, but on condition that Wilfred shall come back as soon as he finds himself falling in love with her.

CHAPTER VII.

(Continued.)

The Half-Opened Bud.

WILFRED smiled at him tolerantly and turned to Willock. "I ought to go to my work, Brick. I won't try to explain what this hour has meant to me for I believe you understand. I'm like a man crossing the desert who finds a spring and gets enough water to last him till the next day." He held out his hand to Lahoma and she had risen swiftly at these signs of departure. "God bless you, little girl," he said cheerfully. "A man's fortune who finds such oases along the desert trail!"

"It was not Bill's gruffness, but Lahoma's charm that won him to flee and break his promise to her guardians."

"But you can't go yet," cried Lahoma, not taking his hand, "there are thousands of things I want to do with you that I've never had a chance to do with anybody else—strolling, for instance. Come and stroll—I'll show you about the cave. Brick and Bill don't know anything about strolling as they do in pictures. Hold out your arm with a crook in it and I'll slip my hand just inside where you'll hold it soft and warm like a bird in its nest. . . . Isn't this noble? And I hold back—excuse me—I hold back my skirts with my other hand, and this is the way we stroll, like an engraving out of the history of Louis the Fourteenth's court. Do, oh, do!" Her bright eyes glowed into his like beckoning stars.

"We stroll," he gravely announced, responding to the pressure of her fingers, but at the same time feeling somewhat gruffly as Bill rolled his eyes fearfully at Brick.

When they were a few yards from the trees Lahoma whispered, "Make for the other side of Turtle Hill. I want to feel grown up when I do my strolling, but I'm nothing but a little barefooted kid when Brick and Bill are looking at me!"

Hidden by the shoulder of the granite hill island she stopped, withdrew her hand and stood very straight as she said, with breathless eagerness, "Answer me quick! Wilfred, ain't I old enough to be a sweetheart?"

"Oh, Lahoma," he protested warmly, "please don't think of it. Don't be anybody's until—until I say the word. You couldn't understand such matters, dear, you wouldn't know the proper time. I'll tell you when the time comes."

She looked at him keenly. "Am I to wait for a time or for a person? I wish you'd never met that girl back there. I think you'd have filled the air for me, because, having always lived here in the mountains, I've not learned to be particular. Not but what I've seen lots of trappers and squatters in my day, but I never wanted to stroll with them. I don't see why that Eastern girl ever turned you loose from her trap. I think a man's a very wonderful thing; especially a young man—don't you, Wilfred?"

"Not half so wonderful as you, Lahoma." His voice vibrated with sudden intensity. "There's your wonderful hair, like light shining through a brown veil. . . . and your eyes, where your soul keeps her lights flashing when all the rest of you is in twilight. . . . and your hands and feet, four faithful little guides to the wonderful treasures that belong only to maidenhood. . . . and your mouth, changing with your thoughts—an adorable little thermometer, showing how high the smiles have risen in your heart: a south sea pure and sweet!"

"Hey!" shouted Bill Atkins, as he and Brick came around the angle of the hill. "Hi, there! You may call that strolling, but if so, it's because you don't know it's true name, because you ask me!"

Wilfred came to himself with a sharp—drawing of his breath. "Yes," he stammered, somewhat dis- sly, "yes, I—I must be going, now."

"PLEASED TO MEET YOU!"

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By Robert Minor



you see she's pining for high society such as I ain't got it in me to supply, and you are too cussed obstinate to display?"

"I guess that's so." Bill drew himself stiffly up by the tree above—they were ascending the wooded gully that extended from base to mountain top. "Well, what's the hurry? She's only seventeen years old."

"Yes, she was only seventeen years old, two years ago; but she's nineteen, now."

Bill Atkins sank upon a rock at the foot of a bristling cedar. "Nineteen! Who, Lahoma? Then where've I been all the time?"

"You've been a-travelling along at a pretty fast clip toward your last days, that's where you've been. Just look at yourself! Ain't you always careful in making your steps as if scared of breaking something? And now you're out of breath!"

Long and sadly the old friends talked. And as a result they decided to send Lahoma away. Willock hit on the plan:

"There's a party over there in Tent City that's come on from Chicago just from the lust of seeing pioneer life at first hand, people that haven't an idea of buying or selling—it's a picnic to them. They're camping out, watching life develop—and what's life-and-death earnestness to others is just amusement to them. That there's a lot of people high-up. Real folks in the big world don't do nothing. It takes all their time just being folks."

"They'll make friends with Lahoma, all right, and invite her home with 'em. That's the way I 'low to set her out in the big world. Lahoma don't know my plans and neither do they, but I was never a man to make my plans known when I was going to hold up people. Of course I'm speaking in a figger, but in a figger I may say I've held up several in my day."

"They won't invite Lahoma to Chicago, not if they are the right sort." "They will invite Lahoma to Chicago," retorted Willock firmly, "and they are the right sort. Wait and see; and when you have saw, render due honor to your Uncle Brick."

"Pardner, I sure am glad to see you—put 'er there again! How are you feeling, anyhow? Look mighty tough and wiry, I do say. Here, Bill!" Willock raised his voice to a powerful shout, "Bill, come and see what's blown in with the tumbleweed and tickle-grass—Wilfred Compton! A sure-enough man, that's what I call him, and me to fight if any dispute's made to the title, according!"

The tall, bronzed man who was leading his horse along the road entering the mountain horsehoe smiled with a touch of gravity in the light of his gray eyes.

"Everything looks very natural!" murmured Wilfred Compton, gazing about on the seemed walls of granite in whose crevices the bright cedars mocked at winter's threatening hand.

"Yes," agreed Willock, "mountains are more natural than humans."

"Did Lahoma marry?" Compton asked abruptly as they descended to the lower level of the cove.

"She never did, yet," replied Bill dryly. "Young man, I'm powerful glad to see you."

Wilfred cast a longing glance toward the cabin. He even stopped in the path; but Willock went on, unconscious, and he was obliged to follow.

"Lahoma is well, I suppose?" Compton asked presently.

"The picture of health—when she left," Brick declared admiringly, "and the prettiest little gal this side of the angels."

"Lahoma's not here?" Wilfred asked anxiously.

"Not now, nor for some time," answered Brick.

"I wish," interposed Bill grimly, "that when you're going to talk about me, Brick, you'd begin with Bill and not be dragging me in at the tail-end of what concerns other people. I reckon, Wilfred, you just travelled here to take a look at the country where you used to herd cattle!"

"That wasn't my reason. Principally, I wanted to see Lahoma, and incidentally, my brother."

"Your brother? He ain't in these parts, is he?"

"No," ruefully, "but I expected him to be. When I left home to turn cow-pancher I didn't tell anybody where I'd gone; but just before I left for Oklahoma to turn farmer I wrote to my brother. And about a month ago, seeing things clearing up before me, I asked him to meet me here at Tent City—he's interested in new towns; he's employed by a rich man to plant hardware stores, and I thought he might find an opening here. He came on, and was here several weeks with a party of sightseers from Chicago; but he left with them about a week ago."

Willock sat suddenly erect. "Couldn't have been that Sellimer crowd, I reckon, from Chicago?"

"Yes—Mrs. Sellimer and her daughter and some of their friends."

Willock whistled loudly. "And that up-and-down looking chap in the gold nose-glasses was your brother?"

"Never thought of that," Bill exclaimed, "although he had your name—he looked so different! But now that you've laid aside your cowboy rigging I guess you could sit in his class, down at the bottom of it."

Willock was uneasy. "I was told," he observed, "and I took the trouble to get ditty on the subject, that them Sellimers—the mother and daughter and the herd they drift with—is of the highest pedigree Chicago can produce. It sort of jolts me to find out that anybody we know is kin to the bunch!"

Wilfred laughed without bitterness. "Don't let my kinship to brother Edgerton disturb your ideal. We're so different that we parted without saying goodbye, and although I had the weakness to imagine we might patch up old differences if we could meet here in the desert, I suppose we'd have fallen out in a day or two—we're so unlike. And as to Miss Sellimer—Annabel Sellimer—she is the girl whose letters I was carrying about with me when I first saw you. She refused me because I was—as poor as herself; so you see the whole bunch is out of my class."

"That's good," Willock's face cleared up. "Mind you, I ain't saying that as for me and Bill; we'd rather sit with you in a dugout than with

them in a palace on Lake Michigan. But it's all a matter of getting Lahoma out into the big world, and you gave me a terrible jolt, scaring me that after all we'd made a mistake and they was just of your plain every-day cloth."

Wilfred moved uneasily. "Has Lahoma made their acquaintance, then?"

"It looks like it, don't it?"

"What looks like it?" Wilfred asked with sudden sharpness.

"Why, her going off with 'em to spend the winter in high life."

"That's why I was glad to see you," Bill explained, "her being gone and us so lonesome. That's why I'd like to have you stay with us a long time—until she comes back, if it suits you."

"But I thought . . . But I came here to see Lahoma," cried Wilfred, unable to conceal his disappointment. "I thought as I came up the road that I saw her half-opening the cabin-door."

"That was Red Feather taking a peep at you. He's the Indian that brought Lahoma to Willock, as a child. He comes, about once a year, to see us, but this time he was a little late for Lahoma. Yes, she's gone east—they're all putting up in Kansas City just now, on their way to Chicago."

"Son," said Willock, puffing at his pipe, "why did you want to see Lahoma?"

"Well—you know she was just a child when I was here before, but she's hovered before my mind a good deal—I've been too busy to seek the acquaintance of strangers—just want to keep the few I know. He blew a rueful breath. "You can't think how all my air-castles have fallen about my ears! I wanted to see Lahoma! . . . I have a good farm, now, not very far from Oklahoma City and—Well, being alone there, year after year, a fellow gets to imagining a great many things!" He stopped abruptly.

"That's so," Willock agreed sympathetically. "I ain't a-saying that if Lahoma'd been like me and Bill, she mightn't of liked farming with you first class. But she was born as an associate of high men and women, not cows and chickens. It's the big world for her, and that's where she's gone. She's with real folks. He Mr. Edgerton Compton your brother, or he be not, you can't imagine him setting down with us sociable in his dugout. You're right about his being different. And the fact that Miss Sellimer turned you down is encouraging too. It shows you couldn't run in her course; you didn't have the speed. I guess we ain't made no mistake after all."

There was silence, broken presently by Bill—"I'm glad you've come, sure!"

"How did she get acquainted with Annabel?"—and with my brother?"

"It came about, son. I see at once that the bunch of 'em was from the big world. I come home and told Bill, 'Them's the people to tow Lahoma out into life,' says I. So they invited her to spend the winter with them, the Sellimers did, and show her city doling."

"Yes—but how did it come about?"

"Nothing more natural. I goes over to their tent and tells them of the curiosities and good points of these

mountains, and gets 'em to come on a sort of picnic to explore. So here they comes, and they gets scattered, what with Bill and Lahoma and me taking different ways—they liked Lahoma first time they see her, as a matter of course. And so, that Miss Sellimer, she gets separated from the rest, and I shows her there to be a hiding-place where nobody couldn't find her, and I shows her what a good joke it would be to pretend to be lost. So I leaves her there to go to tell her crowd she dared 'em to find her. Are you listening?"

"Of course."

"Well, while she was setting there waiting to be searched for, of a sudden a great big Injun in a blanket and feathers and red paint jumps down beside her and grabs her and picks her up, and about as quick as she knew anything, she was gagged and bound and being bore along through the air. I reckon it was a terrible moment for her. Now there is a crifice in the top of the mountain that nobody don't never explore, because it's just a crack in the rock that ain't to be climbed out of without a ladder. So the Injun carries her there, and lets her down with a rope that it seems he must of had handy somewhere, and he puts out; and there she is, in a hollow in the mountain, not able to move or cry out no more than if she'd been captured by a regular highwayman."

Wilfred stared at Willock in complete bewilderment. Willock chuckled.

"There was a terrible time!" remarked Bill.

"Dark was a-coming on before the party got plumb scared," Willock continued, "but they braved and combed the mountain looking for the poor lost lady, and as I tells 'em she's a-hiding a-purpose, they think it a pore sort of joke till midnight catches 'em mighty serious. Torches are carried here and there and everywhere, but no use. You would think that the next day the crowd would naturally look down in that crevice, but that's because I've posted you on where she is. There's lots of other crevices, and no reason as they can see why Miss Sellimer should take the trouble to worm herself down into any of 'em—and as nobody saw that Injun, how could they suspicion foul play? It must of been awful for pore Miss Sellimer, all bound and gagged in that horrible way, but it takes heroic treatment to get some cure—and so Lahoma went with 'em to spend the winter."

"But the Indian?"

"Needn't think about him no more, son, we got no more use for that Injun. Well, on the next day, Lahoma is looking everywhere, being urged on by me, and lo, and behold when she comes to that crevice—looked like she couldn't be induced to go there of her own will, but it was sprung about finally—what does she see but a tomahawk lying right at the edge what must have been dropped there recent, or the crowd would have saw it the day before. It come to her that Miss Sellimer is a prisoner down below."

"She looks, but it's too dark to see nothing. Not telling nobody for fear of starting up false hopes, she gets a light and lowers it—and there is that miserable young woman, bound and gagged and her night dress all

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tore. Lahoma jumps to her feet to raise the cry, when she discovers a ladder under a boulder which the Injun must have put there meaning to descend to his victim when the coast was clear. Down she skids, and frees Miss Sellimer, who's half dead, poor thing! Lahoma comes up the ladder and meets me and I carries her out just like a feather—Well, can't you imagine the rest? I reckon if Miss Sellimer lives a thousand years she'll never forget the awfulness of that big Injun and the angel sweetness of the little gal that saved her. Why, if Lahoma had asked for the rings off her fingers, she could have had 'em, diamonds and all.

"Just as soon as Miss Sellimer was well enough to travel, nothing could hold her in these parts, and that's why your brother had to leave before seeing you—he's setting to Miss Sellimer, and if Lahoma don't git him away from her, I reckon he's a goner!"

CHAPTER IX.

Writing Home.

LAHOMA wrote a wonderful letter to her guardians. They gave it to Wilfred Compton to read. It ran:

"Dear Brick and Bill:

"I don't know what to tell first. It's all so strange and grand—the people are just people, but the things are wonderful. The people want it to be so; they act and think according to the things around them. They pride themselves on these things and on being among them, and I am trying to learn to do that too. When I lived in the cove—it seems a long time ago—my thoughts were always away from dirt-floors and wash-panes. But the people in the big world keep their minds tied right up to such things—only the things are finer—they are marble floors and magnificent restaurants and houses on what they call the 'best streets.' At meals there are all kinds of little spoons and forks, and they think to use a wrong one is something dreadful; that is why I say the folks and spoons seem more important than they are, but they want it to be so. They have certain ways of doing everything, and if you do a wrong thing at a right time, or a right thing at a wrong time, it shows you are from the West. At first, I couldn't say a word or turn around, without showing that I was from the West. But although I've been from home only a few days, I'm getting so that nobody can tell that I'm more important than the furniture around me. I'm trying to be just like the one I'm with, and I don't believe an outsider can tell that I have any more sense than the rest of them."

"We are in a Kansas City hotel where all the feathers are in ladies' hats and bonnets instead of in the gentlemen's hair. To get to our rooms you go to a dark little door and push something that makes a bell ring, and then you step into a dugout on pulleys, that shoots up in the air so quick it makes you feel a part of you has fallen out and got lost. The dugout doesn't slow up for the third story, it just stops that quick—they call it an elevator, and it certainly does elevate!"

"There's an entire room set apart for the sole purpose of bathing!—and the room with the bed in it is separate from the sitting-room. The dining-room is the finest thing I ever saw; I doubt if the kings and queens of old times ever ate in richer surroundings."

"Miss Sellimer is witty and talented, and from the way she treats me I know she has a tender heart. And her mother is a perfect wonder of a manager, and never makes mistakes except such as happen to be the fault of the hour. And Mr. Edgerton Compton could be splendid, for he seems to know everything, and when we travel with him, or go to the parks and all that, people do just as he says, as if he were a prince."

"I know what Mrs. Sellimer has set her heart on, because she has already begun instructing me in her ideals. She wants her daughter to marry a rich man, and only Edgerton Compton isn't rich, he only looks like he is. Mrs. Sellimer feels that she's terribly poor herself; it's the kind of poverty that has all it wants to eat and wear, but hasn't as many horses and servants as it wants. It's just as hard on her as it would be on you if the bacon gave out and you couldn't go for more. Annabel—that's Miss Sellimer—likes Mr. Compton very, very much, but she feels like her mother about marrying a rich man, and I don't think he has much chance."

"The funny thing to me is that Annabel and Mr. Compton both think they have to marry somebody rich, or not marry at all. They really don't know they could marry each other, because imagining they would be unable to keep the wolf from the door. We are not going straight on to Chicago. A gentleman has invited the Sellimers, which of course includes me, to a house-party in the country not far from Kansas City. He

"I must tell you goodbye, now, for Annabel's maid has come to help me dress for dinner, and it takes longer than it did to do up the washing at the cove; and it is more tiresome. But I like it. I like these fine, soft, beautiful things. I like the big world, and I would like to live in it forever and ever, if you could bring the dugout and be near enough for me to run in, any time of the day. I wish I could run in this minute and tell you the thousands and thousands of things I'll never have time to write."

"Your loving, adoring, half-broken, half-bewildered, somewhat dippy little girl, LAHOMA."

"F. S. Nobody has been able to tell from word or look of mine that I have ever been surprised at a single thing I have heard or seen. You may be quite sure of that."

"What's the matter, Wilfred?" broke in Willock. "Can't you let an of that letter?"

"I've made out the name of that widower who's paying court to my old sweetheart," he said, "but it's one I never heard of before; that's why it looked so strange—it's Gledware!"

Willock uttered a sharp exclamation. "Let me see it." He started up abruptly, and bent over the page. "What of it?" asked Bill in surprise. Willock had uttered words to which the dugout was unaccustomed.

"That's what it is," Willock growled; "it's Gledware!" His head had grown strangely dark and swelling, and Wilfred, who had never imagined it could be altered by such an impression, handed him the letter with a sense of uneasiness.

"What of it?" reiterated Bill. "Does it mean Gledware; who is he?"

"Do you know such a man?" Wilfred demanded.

"Out with it!" cried Willock, growling wrathfully at the other growled at the fire. "What's come over you? Look here, Brick Willock, Lahoma is your cousin, but I claim my share in this little girl and I ask you sharp and fast!"

"Oh you go to —!" cried Willock fiercely. "All of you."

The Indian chief who had brought Lahoma to Willock had dropped in for a visit at the dugout. Now he rose silently and left the room. Willock said haltingly:

"That there Gledware—well, maybe it isn't this one Lahoma writes about, but the one I knew is just about middle age, and he's a widower, all right, or the next thing to it—I didn't like Gledware. That was all. I hate for Lahoma to be thrown with anybody of the name—but I guess it's all right. Lahoma ain't going to let nobody get on her off-side, when the wind's blowing."

Bill inquired anxiously, "Did that Gledware you knew live near Kansas City?"

"He lived over in Indian Territory, last time I heard of him. But he was a roving devil—he might be anywhere. Only—he wasn't rich; why, he didn't have nothing on earth except a little—yes, except a little."

"Then he can't be the owner of a big estate," remarked Wilfred, with relief.

"I don't know that. Folks goes into the Territory, and somehow they come to live there. I hope to the Almighty it's a different Gledware!"

(To Be Continued.)